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Atari Online News, Etc.
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A-ONE #1250 12/10/10

~ WikiLeaks Without Ass ~ People Are Talking! ~ China Ordered Hack!
~ Gift Guide for Gamers! ~ New IE9 Privacy Options ~ AOL Mulls Breakup!
~ Facebook Likes RockMelt ~ Chrome 8 Gets Released ~ iPad 2 By February?

~ .xxx Is Getting Closer! ~ Facebook Profile Pages ~ Single License Shared!

-* WikiLeaks Without Assange? *-
-* ICANN Meets To Discuss Domains, Etc. *-
-* Dutch Police Bust 'Anonymous' Hacktivist! *-

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->From the Editor's Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
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First off, let me apologize for missing Joe's column in last week's issue. I was home from work last Friday, and managed to put the issue together a little earlier than usual. Shortly after I released the issue, Joe's column appeared in my inbox - too late to include it, however. So, this week I've included that column, along with the one for this issue.

It's been another really cold week here in New England, at least 10 - 15 degrees colder than normal. Add the brisk winds, and it's a brutal cold! I'm definitely not ready for this weather just yet (not that I'm ever really ready for it at any time!). But, the weather reenforces the time of the season, and the holidays. We've done most of our holiday shopping online again this year. Both my wife and I despise going out holiday shopping. It's just not enjoyable driving to the stores and malls, searching for what seems like hours to find a parking spot, and walking through the crowds browsing among same to search for gifts. And the lines!! Neither of us has the patience any longer! It's so much easier to browse on the internet, and still finding the great deals while avoiding all of the hassles of holiday shopping. And an added bonus of shopping online is that we're less prone to do any impulse buying because we're usually looking for certain items, find them, and make the purchase(s).

Sure, we'll probably have to make at least one trip out to the stores to find an item or two that we can't get online, but that type of a roadtrip is tolerable. Anyway, we're just about done with it all, and just waiting for the last few items to arrive at our doorstep. Then it's just getting everything ready for the big day, and sharing gifts and each other (and the dogs too!) before heading out to my in-law's for dinner.

And sorry, but I'm one of those who will be wishing for a snow-free holiday this year; I can wait until after the new year, if at all possible!

Until next time...

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. Another week has come and gone and Thanksgiving is now behind us. You know what that means... Christmas is just up ahead of us.

And, other than meaning another turkey feast, and aside from the religious implications, we ll have to deal with... well, with each other. You d think that the whole rest of the year would prepare us for it, but it really doesn t. It s cold out there, and the stores are crowded, and it seems that everyone around you is bent on making your life hell. I know. I feel the same way. Those stupid Salvation Army bell-ringers... I d like to take those bells and shov.... well, nevermind. You get the idea.

Just do yourself and everyone else a favor and stop and take a breath instead of glaring at the woman in front of you in the "10 Items Or Less" checkout line with 30 things in her carriage. You'll be surprised how much better you can feel if you just realize that "stuff happens".

Now on to other stuff...

NASA held two press conferences this week, saying ahead of time that they held important information about the search for life in the Universe.

Well, the first one turned out to be a total gutterball. Instead of talking about 'life in the Universe', it turns out that they were talking about a "superEarth", a planet orbiting a star too close to rotate, so it keeps the same side toward its star much like the moon does to Earth. The "news" was that this planet's atmosphere is mostly some kind of vapor.. maybe water vapor... and that there wasn't any sign of anything that would be an indicator of life. So much for important news.

The second press conference was a little more interesting, but it's still just the beginning of the story, with more sure to follow in the coming months and years.

It seems that there's this little bacteria in a pond or lake bed somewhere in California that is unique among all known life forms on the face of the Earth... Instead of using phosphorus in its makeup, it uses... ready? (of course you are... you've seen the news too) arsenic.

Now you may say "big deal", but the fact is that it IS a big deal. Sure, the odds of having 'access' to arsenic and not phosphorus aren't huge, and in that respect, I don't really see what the big deal is. They're bacteria, not ET.

But the fact remains that they're unique among all lifeforms on earth. They don't use phosphorus like we do. They use something that's completely toxic to us. A nasty heavy metal that'll kill you either quick or slow.

But these little guys need it. It'd be interesting to see if phosphorus is as toxic to them as arsenic is to us.

The more interesting thing about this discovery, in my opinion, is that there ARE ways to 'build life' other than the way that built us. THAT opens up a whole bunch of possibilities. Most of all, it gives us the idea of "If you can do it with arsenic, what else can you do it with, and what would that life look like?

One of the things I don’t think they know yet is whether this bacteria evolved ’eating arsenic’ or if it was originally a ’phosphorus sucker’. It may seem like a fine distinction, but it may end up being an important one. It may make us look at lots of things differently.

Personally, I’m not going to get excited about how this relates to life in the Universe until one of these we beasties rears up it... well, whatever passes for its head... and says Klaatu barada nikto. [grin]

Well, that’s all for this week. Tune in again next week, same time, same station, and be ready to listen to what they are saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. Another week has come and gone and Thanksgiving is now behind us. You know what that means... Christmas is just up ahead of us. We’re about half way between the two now.

And, other than meaning another turkey feast, and aside from the religious implications, we ll have to deal with... well, with each other. You d think that the whole rest of the year would prepare us for it, but it really doesn’t. It s cold out there (very cold, as I write this), and the stores are crowded, and it seems that everyone around you is bent on making your life hell. I know. I feel the same way. Those stupid Salvation Army bell-ringers... I d like to take those bells and shov.... well, never mind. You get the idea.

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Now you may say "big deal", but the fact is that it IS a big deal. Sure, the odds of having ’access’ to arsenic and not phosphorus aren’t huge, and in that respect, I really do see what the big deal is from the scientific side, but heck, they’re bacteria, not ET.

But the fact remains that they’re unique among all lifeforms on earth. They don’t use phosphorus like we do. They use something that’s completely toxic to us. A nasty heavy metal that’ll kill you either quick or slow.

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week’s Gaming Section - Winners for Every Kind of Gamer!
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->A-ONE’s Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!
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Gift Guide: Winners for Every Kind of Gamer

Nearly three-quarters of American households own a device that’s used specifically for video games, whether it’s a console, a handheld device or a dedicated computer, according to Nielsen Co. Add to that all the people who play games on their smart phones or their home or work PCs, and no one’s immune.

But games, like gamers, come in all shapes and sizes. The cousin who's addicted to "FarmVille" probably won't be thrilled with "Call of Duty: Black Ops," and vice versa. If you're planning on giving games to your loved ones this year, try to get some idea of how they like to play.

Here are some suggestions for all types of gamers:

* The adventurer: Some gamers just want to live in an alternate world for 100 or so hours. "Mass Effect 2" (Electronic Arts Inc., $19.99, for the Xbox 360, Windows PC) offers that kind of experience, immersing the player in an intergalactic conspiracy involving a lively assortment of human and alien characters. A little closer to home, there's "Red Dead Redemption" (Rockstar Games, $59.99, Xbox 360, PlayStation 3), a stirring Western drama that's stuffed with shootouts, chases and, of course, poker games.

* The warrior: This gamer thrives on online combat with other humans. "Call of Duty: Black Ops" (Activision, $59.99, Xbox, PS3, Windows PC) is the home of the most intense online action right now, thanks to a new wagering system, which lets you gamble with hard-earned game credits. "Halo: Reach" (Microsoft Corp., $59.99, Xbox) adds aliens into the mix, as well as a broader range of multiplayer modes.

* The partier: If your gamer has siblings, roommates or just a lot of neighborhood pals, you want something they can all play together. "Rock Band 3" (MTV Games, $59.99, Xbox, PS3; $49.99, Wii) adds keyboards to the winning "let's start a band" formula. "Pro modes" for guitar, keys and drums get you closer than ever to genuine musical skill. For pure, chaotic fun, "NBA Jam" (EA Sports, $49.99, Xbox, PS3, Wii) delivers high-flying dunks and jaw-dropping alley-oops with a dream team of basketball legends.

* The casual gamer: You know, the ones who say they're just going to play for five minutes and then disappear for an hour? "Bejeweled 3" (Popcap Games, $19.99, PC, Mac), the latest sequel to the gem-matching challenge that defined "casual games" in the last decade, offers eight variations, including a "zen mode" that's supposed to help the player relax. There's also "Puzzle Quest 2" (D3 Publisher/Namco, $19.99, Nintendo DS; $9.99, Xbox, PC), which builds a role-playing adventure around gem-matching action.

* The kids: They already have the Woody action figure and the Buzz Lightyear pajamas, so you might as well spring for Walt Disney Co.'s "Toy Story 3" game ($49.99, Xbox, PS3, Wii). Along with an adventure that follows the movie's plot, it includes a superb "Toy Box," which lets players build their own frontier towns. Also satisfying is Disney's "Epic Mickey" ($49.99, Wii), a challenging adventure in which the iconic mouse tries to revive a world populated by forgotten cartoon characters.

* The toddler: It's never too early for children to get into video games. I've seen a 2-year-old wailing on "Rock Band" drums. Even the folks at "Sesame Street" have gotten on board. In "Elmo's A-to-Zoo Adventure" and "Cookie's Counting Carnival" (WB Games, $39.99, Wii; $29.99, DS, PC), the beloved characters teach letters and numbers in games that are lively yet leisurely.

* The iPhone/iPad gamer: Chillingo's "Angry Birds" was the biggest phenomenon of 2010. The publisher's follow-up, "Cut the Rope" (99 cents, iPhone; $1.99, iPad), is no less addictive. It's a puzzler in which you have to, well, cut ropes in order to feed candy to a friendly monster.

Meanwhile, board-game lovers will relish the iPhone translations of "Catan" (USM, $4.99) and "Carcassonne" (The Coding Monkeys, $4.99).

* The wanderer: Although the iPhone shook up portable gaming in 2010, many travelers still depend on the Nintendo Co.’s DS or Sony Corp.’s PlayStation Portable. The year’s most absorbing DS game is Square Enix’s "Dragon Quest IX" ($34.99), an epic that will keep even the most grizzled sword-and-sorcery veteran busy for dozens of hours. PSP owners can dive into Konami’s "Metal Gear Solid: Peace Walker" ($29.99), which supplements a solid tale of global espionage with more than 100 bonus missions.

* The PC die hard: Some old-school gamers still refuse to buy a console. Fortunately for them, two of 2010’s best titles are playable only on PCs. "Civilization V" (2K Games, $49.99) lets the player build a culture from a handful of impoverished settlers to a nation capable of space exploration. After achieving liftoff, your gamer can compete with two other species for galactic dominance in "StarCraft II" (Activision Blizzard Inc., $59.99).

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A-ONE’s Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Dutch Police Investigate Apparent Hacker Attack

Police said Friday they are investigating if hackers were responsible for taking down websites of police and prosecutors in the Netherlands after the arrest of a 16-year-old for involvement in a cyberattack on several prominent financial payment websites.

"We assume it is hackers. We are not sure yet," said National Police Service spokesman Dennis Janus.

Dutch media reported that the "hacktivist" group Anonymous tried to take down the two sites with a so-called denial of service attack.

Both sites were sporadically online Friday morning.

National Prosecutor’s Office spokeswoman Desiree Wilhelm said prosecutors also are investigating the problems with their website.

Prosecutors said the young hacker police arrested Thursday confessed to participating in attacks by WikiLeaks sympathizers on websites, including MasterCard, PayPal and Visa.

Could WikiLeaks Survive Without Julian Assange?

Its founder is a wanted man, its systems are under attack, it is condemned from the capitals of the world.

But although the future is uncertain for WikiLeaks, the website dedicated to releasing classified information has opened a Pandora's Box of secret-spilling that will be difficult to reverse.

WikiLeaks, which has triggered global governmental alarm by releasing reams of classified U.S. diplomatic cables, is facing attacks in cyberspace and in the legal sphere. The site is assailed by hackers and has been booted from its U.S. server. Frontman Julian Assange is in hiding and faces allegations of sexual misconduct.

"Whatever happens to the domain name and the actual organization, the idea unleashed by WikLeaks is going to continue," said Joshua Benton, director of the Nieman Journalism Lab.

Ben Laurie, a data security expert who advised WikiLeaks before it launched in 2006, agreed.

"The concept is not going to die. It's really hard to keep things shut down if they want to stay up," he said. "Look at everything else people would like not to happen online - phishing, spam, porn. It's all still there."

Little is known about the day-to-day functioning of WikiLeaks. It has no headquarters, few if any paid staff - but a famous public face in Assange, a wiry 39-year-old Australian computer hacker with no permanent address.

He's on the cover of newspapers and magazines around the world, but he has not appeared in public for a month.

Assange, who is somewhere in Britain, is the subject of a European arrest warrant issued by authorities in Sweden, where he is accused of rape, sexual molestation and unlawful coercion.

If British police arrest him, he will likely be caught up in a lengthy legal fight against extradition and could be jailed, his ability to operate as the face of WikiLeaks curtailed even further.

Assange denies the Swedish charges, which his British lawyer, Mark Stephens, has said stem from a "dispute over consensual but unprotected sex." He said Assange was happy to speak to Swedish prosecutors and had provided his contact details to authorities there and in Britain.

Assange also has made powerful enemies in the United States, especially since WikiLeaks released thousands of secret logs from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan earlier this year. With the latest leaks, U.S. politicians have called for him to be prosecuted for espionage - or worse. Former Republican vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin asked on Facebook: "Why was he not pursued with the same urgency we pursue al-Qaida and Taliban leaders?"

Assange acknowledged Friday that "I have become the lightning rod."

"In the end, someone must be responsible to the public and only a leadership that is willing to be publicly courageous can genuinely suggest that sources take risks for the greater good," he said during a question-and-answer session on The Guardian newspaper's website.

"I get undue attacks on every aspect of my life, but then I also get undue credit as some kind of balancing force."

It’s not just governments and the law with whom Assange conflicts. He is a divisive figure who has been accused of overshadowing WikiLeaks’ work and appears to have fallen out with several former colleagues.

They include WikiLeaks’ former German spokesman Daniel Schmitt, who has written a soon-to-be-published book about his time at the website.

In September, German magazine Der Spiegel quoted Schmitt as saying that Assange "reacted to any criticism with the allegation that I was disobedient to him and disloyal to the project."

Yet those who have worked with Assange say his charisma and passion are evident.

"You kind of get the feeling that you are talking to a persona from the ’Matrix’ movies," said Icelandic legislator Robert Marshall, who met Assange while preparing legislation that aims to turn the island nation into a haven of media freedom. "But his enthusiasm toward freedom of expression and the rights of journalists was very real to me."

Laurie recalled Assange as "fairly geeky, very smart, extremely interesting to talk to."

"I know a lot of geeks and I certainly know weirder people than him," Laurie said.

As WikiLeaks released the first few hundred of what it says are a quarter of a million secret diplomatic cables this week, pressure on the site grew.

Amazon.com Inc., which had provided WikiLeaks with use of its servers, evicted it on Wednesday saying the website had violated its terms of service. The site remains on the servers of its Swedish provider, Bahnhof AB.

The next day, WikiLeaks’ American domain name system provider withdrew service to the wikileaks.org name after it came under concerted cyber-attack. Service provider everyDNS said the attacks threatened the rest of its network. WikiLeaks responded by moving to a Swiss domain name, wikileaks.ch. On Friday, the French government moved to ban WikiLeaks from servers in that country.

Chased from one country to the next, WikiLeaks also appears perennially cash-strapped, appealing on its website and Twitter for donations to "keep us strong."

Recently it seems to have taken steps to put itself on a firmer footing. Last month it set up a private limited company in Iceland as part of a move to restructure its global operations. The organization is also establishing legal entities in Sweden and France, spokesman Kristinn Hrafnsson said, as bases from which to carry out tasks such as opening bank accounts.

The Icelandic government recently passed a resolution in favor of a bill that aims to turn the tiny nation into a journalistic haven by granting high-level protection to investigative journalists and their sources. Backers hope the initiative, partly driven by Assange, will become law

next year. Such a law could provide protection to a site like WikiLeaks.

Assange said in Friday's online chat that WikiLeaks had taken steps to make sure it was not silenced, sending the "Cablegate" material and other secret documents in encrypted form "to over 100,000 people."

"If something happens to us, the key parts will be released automatically," he said. "History will win."

Whatever happens to Wikileaks, the anti-secrecy cat may be out of the bag. Schmitt, the former WikiLeaks spokesman, has said he wants to set up a rival secret-spilling site, and others may follow.

"I think the basic concept has a future," said Steven Aftergood, who works on government secrecy policy for the Federation of American Scientists. "Anonymous disclosure of restricted records is easier than it has ever been. The virtues of transparency and government accountability are more widely recognized than they have ever been. Those two factors together provide a foundation for this kind of activity.

"Whether it will be Julian Assange's WikiLeaks or the new German spinoff or another initiative remains to be seen," he said.

Benton, director of the Nieman Lab, said that means governments will have to develop a response beyond condemnation and legal threats. He compared it to music file-sharing, which was greeted with hostility by a music industry that soon realized it had to develop ways to make money from downloads.

"They can't think, 'This is an opponent we need to defeat,'" he said. "They have to think about how they are going to deal with it."

China Leaders Ordered Hacking on Google

Contacts told American diplomats that hacking attacks against Google were ordered by China's top ruling body and a senior leader demanded action after finding search results that were critical of him, leaked U.S. government memos show.

One memo sent by the U.S. Embassy in Beijing to Washington said a "well-placed contact" told diplomats the Chinese government coordinated the attacks late last year on Google Inc. under the direction of the Politburo Standing Committee, the apex of Communist Party power.

The details of the memos, known in diplomatic parlance as cables, could not be verified. Chinese government departments either refused to comment or could not be reached. If true, the cables show the political pressures that were facing Google when it decided to close its China-based search engine in March.

The cable about the hacking attacks against Google, which was classified as secret by Deputy Chief of Mission Robert Goldberg, was released by WikiLeaks.

The New York Times said the cable, dated early this year, quoted the contact as saying that propaganda chief Li Changchun, the fifth-ranked official in the country, and top security official Zhou Yongkang oversaw

the hacking of Google. Both men are members of the Politburo Standing Committee.

The cable notes that it is unclear if Chinese President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao were aware of the reported actions before Google went public about the attacks in January.

The Times, however, said doubts about the allegation have arisen after the newspaper interviewed the person cited in the cable, who denied knowing who directed the hacking attacks on Google. The Times did not identify the person it interviewed.

Another contact cited in that cable said he believed an official on the top political body was "working actively with Chinese Internet search engine Baidu against Google's interests in China."

Google's relations with Beijing have been tense since the U.S.-based search giant said in January it no longer wanted to cooperate with Chinese Web censorship following computer hacking attacks on Google's computer code and efforts to break into the e-mail accounts of human rights activists. Google closed its mainland China-based search engine on March 22 and began routing users to its uncensored Hong Kong site.

Google's spokeswoman in Tokyo, Jessica Powell, said the company had no comment on the cables released by Wikileaks, and on the hacking attacks, referred to a January statement that said it had evidence that the attack came from China. Google at the time declined to say whether the government was involved.

A man who answered the phone at the spokesman's office of the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology said no one was available to comment Sunday. Calls to the Foreign Ministry and the State Council Information Office, which is responsible for regulating Internet contact, rang unanswered.

The hacking that angered Google and hit dozens of other businesses was part of a rash of attacks aimed at a wide array of targets, from a British military contractor to banks. Experts said then the highly skilled attacks suggested the military or other government agencies might be breaking into computers to steal technology and trade secrets to help state companies.

In February, Peng Bo, a high-ranking official with the Internet bureau of the State Council Information Office, said the Chinese government was not involved in or supportive of cyber attacks, and called such accusations "sheer nonsense."

A separate cable released by WikiLeaks showed a Politburo member demanded action against Google after looking for his own name on the search engine and finding criticism of him.

In the version of the May 18, 2009, cable released by Wikileaks, the identity of the official was apparently removed. But the Times reported it was Li, the propaganda chief.

The cable, classified as confidential, cited a source as saying the Chinese official had realized that Google's worldwide site is uncensored, capable of Chinese language searches and search results, and that there is a link from the home page of its China site, google.cn, to google.com.

The official "allegedly entered his own name and found results critical of him," and asked three government ministries to write a report about Google and "demand that the company ceases its 'illegal activities,' which include linking to google.com," the cable said.

The cable said American officials could neither confirm nor deny the details given by the contacts about the Chinese leadership's action.

A contact also said that China asked its three state-owned telecommunications companies to stop working with the search giant, the cable showed. China's main state-owned phone carriers are China Mobile, China Unicom and China Telecom.

Internet Body Meets on Domain Names, IP Addresses

ICANN, the international regulatory body for Web architecture, met here Monday to discuss expanding the list of top level domain names and a new generation of Internet protocol addresses.

"We are a thousand individuals from all over the world convening in Cartagena to adopt fundamental decisions on the biggest issues facing the Internet industry on a global scale," said ICAAN chairman Peter Thrush.

A California-based non-profit corporation, the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers manages the Domain Name System and Internet Protocol addresses that form the technical backbone of the Web.

Every device connecting to the Internet needs an IP address and Thrush said ICANN's board meeting was to help prepare the transition from IPv4 (Internet Protocol version 4) to IPv6, which already exists but is rarely used.

Less than 150 million IPv4 addresses are still available, and "will come to an end by mid-2011, which necessitates an urgent adoption of a new generation of the respective protocols," he said.

During its meeting here, ICANN is also expected to discuss expanding the list of what are known as generic top level domains such as .com, .net and .org.

Thrush said an expansion of domain names would herald "the beginning of a new era of change for completion of the map of the Internet."

Foxconn To Ship iPad 2 As Early As End of February

Chinese electronics maker Foxconn Electronics, a manufacturer of Apple Inc's products, plans to begin shipping the new version of the iPad tablet device, known as iPad 2, as early as the end of February, DigiTimes reported on Tuesday.

The report, citing unnamed sources from the Taiwan-based components maker, said Apple originally planned to start mass production in January.

Those plans were postponed since the device's firmware, or set of software instructions that are programed into the device's hardware, was still being tested, according to the report.

The iPad 2 will mainly be supplied by plants in Shenzhen belonging to Foxconn, the parent company of Hon Hai, DigiTimes reported.

An initial shipment of 400,000 to 600,000 units are expected.

An Apple spokesman was not immediately reachable.

Chrome 8 Released by Google with App Store Access

Google started shipping Chrome version 8 on Thursday. It's the first browser to include built-in access to an app store, which could add a new dimension to the revived browser wars.

Other new features in Chrome 8.0.552.215 include a built-in PDF reader with sandbox security protection instead of a PDF plug-in. There have been a number of reports of security issues with Adobe's PDF software, which sandboxing - or isolating the browser from the system - is expected to address.

Google said the update has 800 "bug fixes and stability improvements." New versions are coming out about every six to eight weeks, although Chrome 8 came only slightly more than six weeks after Chrome 7.

Chrome has been steadily climbing in worldwide market share. According to Net Applications' Net Market Share, Chrome 7.0 gained 5.64 percent global usage share in November, the second-highest monthly gain in the tracking company's history. Firefox 3.6 is the record holder with a 6.09 percent increase from February to March this year.

Chrome's total market share worldwide as of last month is 8.02 percent, so the November jump is bringing the browser out of the shadows. Microsoft Internet Explorer 8.0 still reigns supreme at 32.79 percent, with Firefox 3.6 second at 18.17 percent. IE 6 is at 13.72 percent, and IE 7 has 9.53 percent, followed by Chrome 7. Chrome 6.0 is way down at 13th, with 0.37 percent.

But browser usage varies by market and demographic. For instance, some tech sites are reporting that Chrome is now beating Firefox as the browser used by most of their visitors, with Apple's Safari and IE as runner-ups.

Firefox 4 is expected to be released early in 2011, Microsoft is readying IE 9, and Opera 11 beta is being released, so the browser wars will undoubtedly heat up. Chrome and Opera, in particular, have a reputation for being the fastest browsers.

The Chrome Web Store, with apps and extensions for the browser, is not yet launched, but version 8's in-browser access could make browsers more of a platform than they have been. According to news reports, the Chrome Web Store will go live before the end of the year.

If this strategy of more apps for browsers unfolds in a way that is

similar to other kinds of app stores, the app wars that have centered mostly around smartphones and now tablets could encompass a new generation of browsers as well. The Chrome store is expected to also offer apps for other standards-based browsers.

Many Chrome users might not even be aware of the most recent update, since, unlike other browsers, Chrome automatically updates itself without the user having to do anything. As a result, Net Applications has reported, version 6 was automatically replaced with version 7 within two weeks of its launch.

Facebook Fans Will ’Like’ RockMelt Browser

There’s a lot to keep track of online.

You probably have a Facebook account and an e-mail address or two. You might use Twitter or another service to share where you are or what you’re reading, thinking or doing. You follow the news and do some old-fashioned Web browsing.

I do all of the above (and more), so I’m always looking for ways to wrangle my tangle of online accounts.

That’s what I was hoping for when I tried RockMelt, a new Web browser backed by Marc Andreessen, who was behind the Web’s first commercial browser, Netscape. RockMelt aims to bring together social networking, news feeds and Web browsing.

Does it do the job? Mostly if you rely on Facebook for social networking.

RockMelt, which is available on an invitation-only basis for now, is built on the same foundation as Google Inc.’s 2-year-old Chrome browser. For general browsing purposes, you can expect Chrome’s pros (speed, stability) and cons (some sites don’t work, including the one for paying my cable bill).

Once you install RockMelt, you set it up by giving it permission to integrate your Facebook account. You don’t need to create a new account the way you do with Flock, a competing "social browser" that’s been around for five years. You can then choose to add Twitter and Gmail accounts. RockMelt stores information in the "cloud," so your settings will automatically follow you to other computers.

On the right of the main browser window is what RockMelt calls the App Edge, where buttons offer access to social-networking sites and other websites. On the far left side is the Friend Edge, a column of buttons representing Facebook friends. Above the Friend Edge is your Facebook profile picture - click to send a Facebook status update or tweet.

The buttons in the App Edge point out unread updates or Gmail messages for each account at a glance, an approach I like. However, to actually read Gmail or see private messages sent through Facebook and Twitter, you must still go to those sites. Eric Vishria, and co-founder of RockMelt, said future updates will address this.

Flock has an advantage on this front: Facebook and Twitter messages show up there, though they can easily get lost in the barrage of other updates.

For most websites, clicking on the App Edge button calls up a rectangular panel where you can read the latest posts. Similar panels appear for search results and chat sessions, allowing you to chat and browse without disturbing the main browser window.

The panels start out anchored to the side of the browser, but you can click and drag to make them separate browser windows, which lets you keep several open at once.

I like this approach, but the panels have no "X" button to close them. To make them disappear, I had to find a blank spot in the main browser window and click. This slowed me down until I figured out that I could also hit "Escape."

Google search results, meanwhile, were annoying for another reason: If you accidentally click in the main browser window, the search results panel vanishes.

The App Edge reveals a key difference between Flock and RockMelt: Flock integrates social networks and other website updates into one stream, while RockMelt gives each feed its own button. I like choosing which to examine at a given moment, but others may prefer a single stream.

You can drag a link from the main browser window into the Friend Edge to share it; you can also click on a friend’s name to launch a panel where you can chat, write on the person’s Facebook wall or see and comment on their recent posts.

This is an improvement over Flock, where you can respond to friends’ tweets and posts at they come in, but you need to go to the websites or use other tools such as TweetDeck if you want to see existing Facebook comments or start an interaction.

Flock, aware of its competition, released a major upgrade on Dec. 1. I like the way it lets you create custom groups of friends from different social networks. On RockMelt, only Facebook friends are included in the Friend Edge, and you only have two choices for how they’re displayed - everyone online at the moment or all the friends you designate as "favorites."

From RockMelt’s address bar, you can search the Web and your list of Facebook friends. RockMelt could do better here; in Flock, an address bar search also checks tweets and people you follow on Twitter.

RockMelt performed smoothly overall, though it did crash twice, once when accessing Twitter and once when I tried to share a link. Sometimes I’d click a button and nothing would happen, so I’d impatiently click again, which made the feed disappear as soon as it loaded.

Sometimes the App Edge vanished, leaving me hunting through menus to re-enable it. And the edges themselves take up so much screen real estate that I sometimes had to scroll sideways to see an entire Web page.

RockMelt’s biggest shortcoming is its inability to sync with networks other than Facebook and Twitter. Vishria said more will be added, but for now, Flock is several steps ahead with links to YouTube, LinkedIn and Flickr accounts.

A growing number of social networks are designed to be used on mobile devices, which raises another drawback: RockMelt is strictly a desktop

browser, though I’m told the developers are considering a mobile version.

So should you try RockMelt? If you rely on Facebook for social networking, sure. You’ll find this a fast, stable browser that’s rich with Facebook-friendly features - many more than are available on Flock, though the gap is narrowing with the latest version of the latter.

If you’re a social media power user, you’ll find yourself relying on other tools that do the many things RockMelt doesn’t. While you’re waiting for RockMelt to incorporate more sites, try Flock instead - it brings more of the social media universe to your fingertips than any other browser on the market.

Facebook Rolls Out Redesigned Profile Pages

Facebook on Sunday introduced a redesign of its user profile pages in advance of an interview on the "60 Minutes" news show where CEO Mark Zuckerberg explained the redesign.

The changes include a clustered listing of biographical information under the user name at the top of the page, including such details as the person’s job, hometown, relationship status, where they went to college, what languages they speak and birthdate. Beneath that will appear a set of the five most recent photos that a user allows to be posted at their profile page. There also is a new sports category under interests, where users can list their favorite sports, teams and athletes.

Although in her taped interview with Zuckerberg, Lesley Stahl said that viewers of the show Sunday night were the first to see the redesign, the new look had actually debuted early Sunday morning in a promotional clip for the show at the CBS News website. The redesign was also announced later in the day at the Facebook blog by software engineer Josh Wiseman.

The TV interview focused much more on how Facebook came to be, its culture, issues related to users’ privacy, and its efforts to make inroads in the search market than on the redesign. Zuckerberg said that he and his Harvard University friends who created what became Facebook as a way to connect students there never imagined that their creation would "lead the whole Internet in this direction" of social networking. Stahl, who had interviewed him in the past, said that Zuckerberg is more relaxed now than he was then, even if he still seldom blinks.

A dozen designers worked on the redesign in a "war room" where a clock ticked down the time they had left to complete the update, according to the "60 Minutes" account, which showed the redesign using Zuckerberg’s page (he’s a Yankees fan, the new sports category reveals about his baseball interests).

The revamping of profile pages, which had been expected, is already being rolled out to any of the site’s 500 million users who are interested in changing the look of their Facebook pages now. Those who opt to wait will find their pages automatically revamped in the coming weeks, according to Facebook. Visually, the new design makes more use of photographs users have posted at their pages and displays those more prominently, including photos of friends.

Users will also now be able to "highlight the friends who are important

to you, such as your family, best friends or teammates," the blog says. New groups of friends or the featuring of existing friends lists also is part of the redesign. Interests and activities also now have more focus on the profile pages and are more in evidence.

The redesign, as with all aspects of Facebook, is aimed in part at appealing to advertisers and marketers who mine information about users from the site. But it also is meant to make it easier for people to find information on friends and to provide "a more compelling visual experience."

The site's constantly controversial privacy settings have not been altered in the redesign. Stahl addressed privacy by raising with Zuckerberg that third-party applications share information about users. He insisted in response: "It's against all of our policies for an application to ever share information about our users." Stahl interrupted him to say, "but they do," which prompted Zuckerberg to say that those third-party applications are shut down.

As always with any Facebook change, users were quick to express criticism and support. "Horrible design and against near every solid UI principle in web design," wrote user Shawn Hesketh, who on his Facebook page is identified as the owner of LeftLane Designs in Houston. Christopher Bradshaw of Liverpool, England, decried the changes as "not fair" because he uses Facebook for business purposes including paying for advertising at the site, and the changes alter layouts of those ads and promotions making some appear "tiny," he wrote in response to Wiseman's blog announcement.

But user Craig Gunnels of San Antonio, Texas, wrote simply, "love the new profile page!" Others in response to Wiseman's post noted that some people simply don't like change and will adjust to the new look with time.

Other users expressed confusion because their profile pages had not changed. Although on "60 Minutes," Stahl said that the redesign would roll out on Monday, users were able to make the updates on Sunday. Those who want to change the look of their pages immediately can do so by going to a Facebook page that explains the changes and offers a link at the bottom to update now.

Microsoft Adding Privacy Options to New Web Browser

Microsoft unveiled increased privacy options Tuesday for the upcoming version of its popular Web browser Internet Explorer 9 including the ability to prevent tracking by third-party websites.

The US software giant said that the new feature, "Tracking Protection," is designed to "help consumers be in control of potential online tracking as they move around the Web."

"Tracking Protection is the new privacy feature in Internet Explorer 9 designed to help keep third-party websites from tracking your Web behavior," Microsoft said in a press release.

Microsoft said it will be built into a test version of IE9 being released early next year.

The default will be for Tracking Protection to be off, Microsoft said,

and IE9 users will have to create lists of the third-party websites that they do not want to track their behaviour.

Microsoft’s privacy announcement comes amid moves in Washington to create "Do Not Track" mechanisms that would signal to online services not to collect Web surfing or ad-targeting data.

The US Federal Trade Commission last week proposed an online "Do Not Track" option and a US congressman announced plans to introduce legislation that would bar companies from tracking the behavior of children online.

"Some consumers today have been very clear that they have privacy concerns, like being unclear about what information is being shared and how it is used as they browse," said Peter Cullen, Microsoft’s chief privacy strategist.

"Consumers understand that they have a relationship with the site they visit directly, whose address is clearly visible to them," Cullen said.

"The modern Web though means that websites include content from many other sites as well," he said. "These ’third-party’ sites are in position to potentially track consumers, via cookies and other technology mechanisms."

Tracking Protection allows users to set up lists of third-party websites they do not want to exchange information with and to keep their choices in place as they navigate the Web.

"These lists include Web addresses for IE to treat as ’Do Not Call’ unless the consumer visits the address directly," said Dean Hachamovitch, head of Internet Explorer development, in a reference to popular "Do Not Call" lists used to curb telemarketers.

"If a consumer chooses to add a Tracking Protection List, Internet Explorer 9 prevents information from being sent to the addresses in that list," Hachamovitch said.

Microsoft released an initial test version of IE9 in September which did not include Tracking Protection. Microsoft doesn’t charge separately for IE and the browser is included with Windows software.

Internet Explorer is the most widely used Web browser in the United States followed by Mozilla’s Firefox, Google’s Chrome and Apple’s Safari.

AOL Mulls Breakup, Then Merger with Yahoo

AOL Inc is actively exploring a breakup of the company in a complicated series of transactions that may lead to a merger with Yahoo Inc, sources close to the plans told Reuters.

AOL has not yet made a formal proposal to Yahoo, these people say.

Shares of AOL rose 1.5 percent in afternoon trading, while Yahoo edged down 0.1 percent.

In many respects, the latest discussions derive from plans contemplated

in 2008 and 2009 before Time Warner spun off AOL to Time Warner shareholders.

At the time, the media conglomerate had explored the option of breaking apart AOL’s two main businesses. The legacy dial-up Internet service would have been spun off or sold to EarthLink or United Online, while the display advertising business would have been merged into Yahoo, the sources said.

Pushing ahead with plans to rid itself of a decade-long nightmare, Time Warner spun off AOL rather than face heavy tax liabilities that would have been associated with a breakup, said the sources.

The sources requested anonymity because they were not authorized to speak to the media.

AOL has continued to explore a breakup and other options since the December 2009 spinoff. "You can drive the pieces into people’s hands that could pay top dollar for them and create value, or spin them off," said one of the sources.

This strategy depends on the buyers for the parts. Yahoo and EarthLink, for example, have changed direction since Time Warner first considered these plans, the sources said.

EarthLink was once a willing and capable buyer of AOL’s cash-generating dial-up business. But because it is tying up most of its free cash in a deal to buy DeltaCom Inc for $516 million, it is unlikely to pursue another big transaction for now, another source said.

Combining Yahoo and AOL’s Web properties makes strategic sense, said Hudson Square Research Inc analyst Todd Rethemeier. Yahoo’s home page attracts audiences to its sports, finance, general news and email, while AOL has strengths in maps and entertainment news, he said.

Yahoo, which analysts expect to generate $1.64 billion in earnings before interest, tax, depreciation and amortization this year, could support AOL’s display ad business. That could give AOL the confidence to shed the dial-up division.

AOL and Yahoo declined to comment. A source close to Yahoo reiterated that it is not seeking proposals or is in any buyout discussions with AOL.

AOL has been reluctant to shed its dial-up business, which remains a major source of revenue and whose 4 million customers remain a big contributor of traffic to the company’s home page. Rethemeier expects the division to contribute a little over $1 billion of revenue out of $2.4 billion overall this year.

The dial-up business could fetch two or three times EBITDA, said UBS analyst Brian Pitz.

"I don’t think as a stand-alone either Yahoo or AOL are going to be as competitive as they once were," Pitz said. "One plus one might equal two and a half."

To resolve the tax concerns, the dial-up and display businesses would need to be spun off rather than sold for cash, said one of the sources.

These plans come amid a painful turnaround strategy led by AOL Chief Executive Officer Tim Armstrong, who has quickly divested weak properties such as social networking website Bebo and bought high-profile blogging network site TechCrunch.

Still, the company’s core operations remain weak. Rethemeier estimated revenue declines of almost 27 percent at the dial-up subscription business and 28 percent at the advertising business in 2010.

"AOL is down to a little over 4 million dial-up users," Rethemeier said. "That has been dropping by 200,000 to 300,000 every quarter."

One of the sources familiar with AOL’s thinking called the company a declining business. "If you do nothing, your value just treads water at best, probably loses value," the source said. "That’s the conundrum."

"The issue is Yahoo has no interest in dial-up, and with the traffic flow between (AOL’s two) businesses, it is not easy to sever," said one of the sources. But AOL’s further investment in display advertising appears to be an attractive maneuver to Yahoo, said that source.

For now, AOL may have some time to weigh its options. It has about $600 million in cash and almost no debt on its balance sheet. With its asset disposals in the fourth quarter, the business is still cash-flow-positive, said Rethemeier.

The focus is now on what Yahoo does next. To complete a merger with AOL, Yahoo would need to take a series of steps to shrink in size, sources said.

The most plausible scenario, according to the sources, is Yahoo being broken up through a private equity buyout combined with a sale of the company’s Asia assets to a strategic buyer, said two of the sources.

In one scenario, Yahoo would need to sell its stakes in China’s Alibaba Group Holdings, of which Japan’s SoftBank is the second-largest shareholder, and Yahoo Japan.

Since Yahoo made its investments in Alibaba and Yahoo Japan, the value of both of those entities has gone up dramatically, said one of the sources.

As a result, the tax consequences would make a deal "thorny and tough to make work," said one of the sources. "That strategy is the equivalent of throwing a basketball from underneath your own hoop - it is not going to happen."

Yahoo shareholders could face a 38 percent in taxes on the price of the transaction, that source said.

Porn Sites Closer to Getting ’.xxx’ Web Address

Porn sites are closer to getting their own address on the Internet.

The online red-light district would be in the form of an ".xxx" domain name suffix alongside longstanding ones such as ".com" and ".org."

Following a decade-long battle, the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers, or ICANN, voted Friday to proceed with a contract with ICM Registry LLC to sell domain names ending in ".xxx." ICANN voted in June to start negotiating the contract.

The new suffix still has other hurdles to clear, however. At a meeting in Cartagena, Colombia, ICANN decided to first consult with an advisory committee comprised of government officials worldwide. Some committee members have raised concerns about a suffix dedicated solely to sites with adult content. It's not clear whether and how their objections would affect the suffix.

Stuart Lawley, ICM's chief executive, said the new suffix would benefit adult entertainment sites by making it easier for customers to find them. Customers, too, would benefit, he said, because sites with an ".xxx" address would commit to protect consumers from identity theft and credit card fraud and not to traffic in child abuse images.

Use of ".xxx" would be voluntary, though, and skeptics argue that few adult-only sites would give up their existing ".com" addresses.

And conservative religious groups worry that an ".xxx" suffix would legitimize Internet porn.

ICM Registry, which is based in Palm Beach, Fla., applied to set up an ".xxx" suffix in 2000 and again in 2004. Although ICANN gave it preliminary approval in 2005, it later rejected the proposal. ICM Registry appealed, and an independent review found that ICANN did not have a valid reason for changing its mind - paving the way for Friday's vote.

The porn industry isn't completely behind ".xxx," because some see the site as creating a ghetto for adult content and setting rules where they don't want any. But Lawley said ICM already has 189,000 "pre-registrations" for ".xxx" sites and expects to register roughly 500,000 new sites when it launches the registry in the second quarter of 2011.

Single Software Licence Shared 774,651 Times

A single licence for Avast security software has been used by 774,651 people after it went viral on a file-sharing site, according to the company.

Avast noticed that a license for its paid-for security software, sold to a 14-user firm in Arizona, was being distributed online. Rather than shut down the piracy, the company decided to see how far the software would spread.

The Avast Pro licence showed up on file-sharing sites, and a year and a half later it had topped three-quarters of a million active users.

"We found our licence code at a number of warez sites around the globe," said Vince Steckler, chief executive of Avast Software. "There is a paradox in computer users looking for free antivirus programs at locations with a known reputation for spreading malware."

The licence is being used in 200 countries - and has even been installed

on two computers in the Vatican City, Avast added.

"It was quite interesting how fast it went, but at some time the party has to end," Avast spokesman Lyle Frink told /PC Pro/.

The company is turning the piracy into a marketing opportunity, looking to flip users of the pirated version to genuine software by popping up a notice on machines with the illegally-shared edition offering a link to the free or paid-for versions.

While Frink had no data about exactly how many pirates had chosen to go legitimate, he said there had already been 'some conversions'. He added: "It s going according to plan."

Steckler told PC Pro that the Arizona firm has had their license replaced. "We also reminded them to keep their licenses secure."

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